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Fire Under the Ashes: A Year After Iran's Troubled Elections

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By Adel Al Toraifi

As some analysts expected, the anniversary of the Iranian elections passed with neither huge protests in the streets nor any prominent events taking place. Except for some student arrests and an individual attack against the former presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi, the Iranian regime proved that it is the master of the situation. This reality was made clear when leaders of the opposing green movement backed down from organizing protests days before the anniversary and instead apologized out of fear of security measures taken by the Iranian regime. Perceived as a serious weakness by their supporters, members of the opposition have decreased in number.

Some attribute reasons for the green movement's retreat to the success of the Iranian authorities backed particularly by the revolutionary guard and the Basij militia in the forced reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Also, a series of trials, sentences and executions against supporters of the opposition under the noses of its leaders—Rafsanjani, Mousavi, Khatami, and Karroubi—proved that opposition to the existing regime is still weak and ineffective in changing the situation in the Iranian political arena. In this context, the political analyst Reza Esfandiari commented in the Telegraph (12 June), "Despite the claims of a rigged poll, all of the available evidence indicates to [the election] being authentic and that a majority of Iranians support the current government." He went on to say that "The failure of the Green (reformist) movement one year on is largely down to the fact that it could not draw among ordinary Iranians outside of the political elite and cosmopolitan social base."

However, others see that the apparent calm conceals much anger and internal congestion, or as The New York Times called it in a 12 June report, "fire under the ashes." The report indicates that the Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad may appear victorious at this stage, but many people in Iran today feel that—despite the apparent retreat of the green movement—underground opposition not directly associated with the movement is growing, and it is distinguishing itself from both the existing political regime and its opponents. If this is true, then the conservative and reformist parties have lost their chance to challenge the serious imbalance of power in the Iranian political system. In effect, the revolution that represented the people has become a regime that forcefully controls a youth nation that was born after the revolution.

While the neo-conservatives in Iran enjoy their victory over the internal opposition, Iran has become internationally isolated similar to the post-revolution years; the major countries passed a fourth package of sanctions with the concurrence of Iran's friends: Russia and China. Though the Iranian government appears negligent to these strategic losses, the country—according to some observers—may face major economic challenges domestically.

During 2007 and 2008, Iran gained significant income from its oil returns, and the peak of the oil prices (\$150) helped the central government cover its gross expenditures in projects supporting the poor who, in fact, form the public base of President Ahmadinejad. However, Iran is facing an economic blockade that may harm its foreign trade. In 2008, Tehran's trade with its five biggest Asian trading partners reached about one billion dollars. The majority of Iran's exports go to countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Iraq and Afghanistan, but the value of this trade is likely to decrease to 2001 rates, less than \$500 million, if these sanctions are implemented more strictly than before.

In his important book *Forces of Fortune* (2009), Vali Nasr argues, "The great battle for Iran's soul – and the future of the whole region – will be fought not over religion or sects, but over the freedom of trade and capitalism." Thus, the economic sanctions imposed on Iran will have significant consequences. Iran's gross domestic product, now, is similar to that of Massachusetts. Experts argue that Iran's economic status prevents Iran from being a major player regionally, let alone confronting countries such as the United States or the European Union.

The neo-conservatives in Iran argue that acquiring nuclear technology – not necessarily possessing a nuclear weapons arsenal – is essentially a response to the foreign threats they face, and that the western countries, especially those in the region, will have to correct their stances and acknowledge Iran's status as a major country. It is true that reaching a nuclear capability may change the balance of power in the region. Nevertheless, it will change nothing in the balance of the internal dispute. Ray Takeyh (*Guardians of the Revolution*, 2009) points out that the extreme rightist policies of the Mullahs in coalition

with the guards [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps] may have ensured their success in the regional conflict with the international community, but the domestic challenges might be the greatest threat to their existence in power. Eventually, failing to solve domestic problems was the main reason behind the fall of countries such as the Soviet Union.

The neo-conservatives may have succeeded in this round, but as a Persian proverb states, "Forgiveness hides a pleasure not found in revenge." It is a lesson they don't realize clearly; Iran will never be as it was before, as anger and revenge are still burning under the ashes.

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